

INTERNATIONAL TEACHER TRAINING COURSES - A NEW STEP TO GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the aims and the design of the international e-learning course for teacher training "International Project" / Internet and Competence to work on the Project"/IPC/, organized with students from the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria) and universities from Germany, USA, Spain, Japan, Sweden and Poland (<http://www.internationalproject-ipc.com/en/>). The project has a long tradition and is developed in co-operation from university teachers by using different methods and approaches. The project is based on an inquiry-based learning. The topics of the student's investigations are connected with the school education and with the children's perspective on school, teaching and learning. Coached by university teachers and tutors the students work in many international groups using different research methods and web tools as wikis, chat forums or blogs. By working on topics selected from the teacher training curriculum the students improve their expertise related to the curriculum and develop awareness of cultural differences. At the end of the course the students from the different universities present the results of the comparative international research and do conclusions about the differences and similarities in the curriculum and the education in different countries and continents. The IPC project fosters the development of many competences for teacher students because of working and doing educational research in international team.

KEYWORDS

Teacher Training, Learning Process, International Research, e-Learning, International Project, Internet

1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern world without borders the formation of a variety of key competences acquires greater significance. Of great importance for the modern teacher is not only to know the theory of his specialty and pedagogical concept, but also to be able to communicate with their colleagues, to work in a team, to generate, share and justify ideas, to make valuable observations on the effectiveness of his work and the experience, the interests and the achievements of students he works with. The basis of various activities involving the modern pedagogue inevitably includes the modern technologies of the Internet as a global communications network.

Another contemporary trend that we cannot ignore is the global internationalization in education. Official international documents concerning generating line policies are approved and adapted. Various opportunities for communication and collaboration with colleagues from other countries are determined. Widespread is the participation of schools and other educational establishments in international /bilateral and multilateral/ projects in European and global programs. This implies the availability of information not only for the national traditions, but also knowledge of the educational systems of other countries. It also requires knowledge of English and skills to conduct a joint investigation.

2. BODY OF PAPER

2.1 History and Development

The e-course “Internet and competence to work on the project”/ “International Project” provides an answer to these challenges. The e-course was organized in 2006 by the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” during the training of the students in the pedagogical specialties. In the period between 2006 to 2021 it was attended by students enrolled in bachelor and master programs, of the specialties: Primary School Education and Foreign Language, Preschool and Primary Education, Primary school education and Preschool education and Foreign Language, Social Education and Pedagogy.

The concept of the course is the brainchild of Professor Jean-Paul Martin from Catholic University in Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany (Martin, 2005). His idea was to connect students, future specialists, from different countries and continents, to work on joint projects through information and communication technologies.

During the first year of the course it was attended by students from different specialties (pedagogical, philosophic, economic), countries and universities. The experience has shown that the variety of subject areas, interests and competences of the students cover a wide range, making it difficult to work and also creates difficulties in the formulation of conclusions. That forced the full reconsideration of concept of the course. For effective implementation of the tasks of great importance was to find professors from foreign universities who work with students from pedagogical specialties and to enable the developed projects to overlap with the training programs of the students and thus to enrich their pedagogical experience (Mirtschewa, 2007, 480).

The original concept had been adapted to the teacher training curriculum in 2008 by Prof. Dr. Klaudia Schultheis (Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt) and was first tested with Prof. Dr. Iliana Mirtschewa (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria) and in the following years evaluated with Prof. Dr. Leigh Ausband (University of North Carolina Charlotte, USA).

The current university training course was developed as innovative international project for training of teachers. Students and university professors from eight universities (Catholic University Eichstaett-Ingolstadt, Germany; Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski”, Bulgaria; University of North Carolina Charlotte, USA; University of Granada, Spain; Catholik Junshin University Nagasaki, Japan; Yamaguchi University, Japan; California State University Fullerton, USA, Karlstad University, Sweden; Pedagogical University of Krakow and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland) take part in it.

During the period 2006-2021 more than 1000 students attended the course. In the beginning the basic work language was German, later German and English and in the last 11 years English. In the years of the implementation of the course different communication systems were used: Wikiwesity (during the first years), SNS mixxt (social communication net provided by mixxt GmbH), Haiku Learning and during the last year Schoology. To create a main web page, book with the participants in the course, forums, groups’ pages, boxes of files, WIKI, chats, news and a calendar the Web 2.0 was applied.

In the process of training the students work in international groups and they make a scientific study of selected research topics related to their interests.

2.2 Competencies and Skills

The course has the following objectives:

- enrichment of pedagogical research experience of students /shaping the theoretical justification of the chosen topic, formulating of objectives and the working hypothesis, selection of an appropriate research methodology/;
- mastering the skills of the prospective teachers to monitor the characteristics of the learning process, to monitor students’ behavior and to ascertain their concepts interests and preferences;
- formation of skills for analyzing, formation and presentation of the results of an implemented empirical study, formulation of scientific conclusions and conclusions;
- development of competence to work in international teams and projects;
- mastering of skills for communication with potential professional partners through Internet;
- mastering of skills to work with information and communication technologies;
- improvement of the skills for learning of foreign languages.

2.3 Phases

The common work passes through the following phases:

- Each student presents himself in a common forum and shares his interests and creates a personal profile on the Internet. This is the way to establish contacts with international partners.
- During the next phase, based on the topics, proposed by the students, international groups are formed to conduct research in a selected problem. Each group works in its own research and thematic forum. In this phase examining of scientific literature on the topic is also done. The aim and the hypotheses are also determined. The students select appropriate research methods. The suggestions of the individual students from each group are summarized by WIKI.
- In the third phase, students from different universities make theoretical and empirical researches in schools or other educational institutions. After the completion they summarize the results and analyze the results from the different countries. Then through a teamwork the students make a comparative analysis of the results and formulate conclusions.
- The last phase is related with the preparation of a common Poster or Power Point presentation or e-Book (using Book Creator) showing the research design and summarizing the results.
- On a special day organized for each research group the students present the phases and the results of their work. This is usually done at the national level, with each group presenting their results at their own university. During the last year (2020/2021), in a pandemic, the final presentations were held online, with the participation of all students from all countries and universities participating in the course. This enabled international groups to jointly present the results of their research. Thus, the team work in the group took place at all stages of the work, including the final one.

In all phases of their work the students were led and consulted by the university teachers participating in the teams of the different universities. Tutors are also included to help students. Each activity included in the different phases was discussed with the students from the different universities and the respective university classes. Successfully graduated students receive a certificate issued jointly by the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt University and the university in which they are trained.

2.4 Examples

In 2012/2013 the course "Internet and competence to work on a project" was attended by 111 students from six countries, who worked on nine topics. Discussions on individual projects were organized in thematic group forums. The number of participants varies among the groups. The comments in the group forums are numerous, well-grounded and testify to students' active participation in shaping the design of the pedagogical study developed by the respective team (see Table1).

Table 1. Participation of students in group forums

Group	Number of participants	Number of comments
Group 1	18	230
Group 2	17	89
Group 3	17	162
Group 4	20	132
Group 5	22	123
Group 6	16	51
Group 7	16	94
Group 8	13	68
Group 9	18	127

Within the academic year 2014/2015, the main theme, that the students research is “Homework”. All 136 participants were divided into 10 groups. In each group there are students from different countries, they were all selected from classes of future primary school teachers, from six different universities and countries (Radeva/ Velkovski, 2015, 96).

The number of written comments was 1771, an average of 177 comments in group and 17.7 comments per participant. This statistic reveals that each participant had shared his thoughts on the subject around 18 times (Radeva/ Velkovski, 2015, 97).

Choosing the design of the study, is the step that caused the most serious discussions. Students were asked to give their own ideas and suggestions that can be used with children of primary school age. After a decision is made the group must decide which variables will they test and how, thus five types of design were formed (Radeva/ Velkovski, 2015, 97)

Seven of the groups have chosen to use telling a story to the students and to combine it with another method - writing a letter (three of the groups), completing the questionnaire has been used from three of the groups and drawing was used by one group (Radeva/ Velkovski, 2015, 97).

A total of 600 children took participation in the study from all countries involved in the project, an average of 60 children in ten groups. This allowed these three types of analysis:

- Qualitative analysis at group level;
- A comparative analysis between the groups used a uniform methodology;
- A common frequency analysis, allowing quantitative analysis of all respondents.

Results: The collected information was evaluated by the groups then the results were compared with the theoretical content and the data was analyzed according to the frequency of occurrence (Radeva/ Velkovski, 2015, 98).

Within the academic year 2020/2021, the main research topic is “Covid 19 Impact on Schools – Organizing Teaching and Learning in Difficult Times” because of the current pandemic situation in the world.

The objectives of the study were:

- to study the impact of the pandemic on people’s lives;
- to establish how the epidemic situation changes the attitudes of adults and children;
- to monitor changes that occur in the field of education;
- to find out how the primary school students adapt to the situation;
- what impact does the current situation have on the health and well-being of students;
- what impact does the pandemic have on human communication;
- how the teacher’s role changes;
- how the participants in the learning process feel when they are placed only in front of the screen and are deprived of direct contact with the other subjects involved in the process;
- how the role of the information and communication technologies in the learning process in a pandemic is changing.

About 100 students were divided into groups. They chose some of the following research topics (Table 2):

Table 2. Research topics (2020/2021)

Research topics
How Does Covid 19 Influence Learning and Teaching in the Future?
Impact of Covid 19 on Student’s Mental Health and Well-being
How Covid 19 Affects the World? Challenges for Children
On the Other Side of the Screen
How Covid 19 Changes the World of the Children?
Navigating the New Normal in the Covid 19 Pandemic
Barriers for Learning Online and How to Deal with Them
The Differences in the Quality of Learning and Teaching Caused by Technical Devices in Combination with Educational Disparities
Is Online Learning Effective Now?
Barriers for Learning Online and How to Deal with Them

The students used Padlet and Book Creator to summarize their ideas and the results from the research (theoretical and empirical). Replaced were the traditional ways to shape the ideas of working in groups and of presentation through Power Point and Poster. This made it possible to try new ways of designing and presenting a joint research product. The knowledge and skills of the students to use information and communication technologies were enriched.

In the conditions of a pandemic some changes in learning and communication between students from different universities were found. The desire of the students to discuss as often as possible the planning of the stages of their work and the results of the conducted research through online media/ platforms (Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp etc.) was strengthened. The organization of the final online meeting for all universities, concluding with a presentation of the results of the work, had a great influence on the motivation of the students to form their conclusions and e-Books for the presentation. The intensity of the meetings increased to 100%. The students also used often mobile phones to communicate and to study in groups. This allowed learning to take place outside the home and classrooms and to be held at a time convenient for students from different countries and time zones.

The increased desire for more intensive group learning can be explained in several ways. On the one hand, during the year of online training (Sommer semester 2019/2020 and Winter semester 2020/2021) in the conditions of a pandemic, the students got acquainted with various programs and means of online communication. This increased their competence in the field of information and communication technologies. On the other hand, artificially imposed social isolation causes the search for more opportunities to meet and exchange information with peers, including in the learning process. This significantly alleviates the problems associated with social distance. This also has a strong impact on training, leads to increased motivation and improved learning outcomes.

2.5 Survey

To evaluate the effectiveness of the ongoing course every year on-line polls are conducted. They ascertain the attitude of students to work in an international team and the attitude of the future teachers to work together. For example, the results of the survey conducted with students in 2008-2009 indicate positively that 95% of students believe that for the teacher of the 21st century is of great importance to know the teaching methods in other countries.

Respondents point to two aspects of this need (Ausband / Schultheis, 2010, 276):

- to know the pedagogical practice in other countries so that to assess the level of the educational system in their own country,
- to help the teachers who work with children from different cultures.

These responses highlight an important advantage of the ongoing international course, namely the preparation of the students for their future career as teachers in a globalized society.

A questionnaire created by the project leader, Prof. Dr. Klaudia Schultheis, was uploaded on the IPC project website enabling all the student participants worldwide to evaluate the project in its ending stage in early December 2013. The study takes into account the positive aspects of the participation in the course and also the difficulties that students encounter in the process of work (Suzuki, 2013, 3).

The questionnaire consisted of three parts about the respondents' background (Suzuki et.al., 2015, 75):

- Personal Data,
- International Experience,
- Internet Experience; as well as four parts about the IPC Project,
- Experience of Group Project,
- Learning Objectives,
- Problems,
- Conclusion.

Some of the results point the opinion of the students from the different universities and countries in a variety of areas:

Experience with IPC: Learning Objectives

The students reported their learning objectives could be achieved as demonstrated by the following results:

- i) improvement of international experiences (69.4%), ii) learned how to organize an online collaboration

(67.4%), iii) increase of knowledge on the group topic (61.7%), iv) broadened knowledge of education and schools in other countries (61.3%), v) familiarity with internet platforms (59.2%), and vi) benefit for future work as a teacher (59.2%).

Experience with IPC: Problems

Three problems rated at various degrees were reported by the respondents: i) knowing what to do (63.3% for 'partially', 12.2% for 'a lot', and 24.5% for 'no'); ii) time schedule (61.2% for 'partially', 14.3% for 'a lot', and 24.5% for 'no'); and iii) finding literature and information about the topic (57.1% for 'partially', 18.4% for 'a lot', and 32.7% for 'no'). On the other hand, the students reported the following to be mostly unproblematic: i) teachers (67.3% for 'no'); ii) other group members (55.1% for 'no'); and iii) group topic (51% for 'no'). (Suzuki et.al., 2015, 77-78)

Simultaneously with the international survey, discussions that aim to ascertain how students evaluate the course of training, are periodically carried out in each country. During the discussion, the students share their impressions of joint working. They share their previous experience in the field of e-learning and in the field in which they did the research. The students share the benefits, the new challenges in learning and communication, the issues and problems that have arisen.

Summary of the impressions of the prospective teachers from the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" the students highly evaluate the ongoing course activities, share the benefits of such training and communication (see Table 3).

Table 3. The impressions of the students from the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for the university course "Internet and the competence to work on a project"/ "International project"

Impressions
We now have an idea of the way in which the educational process takes place in the other countries
We worked for the improvement of our communication skills
We learned how to work in a team
We found out that such projects require creativity and autonomy
Through such research we can understand a lot about kids on a certain topic by exploring
We established new contacts
We met with new perspectives on discussed issues
We established communication with people from different nationalities
We learned how to do a comparative study
We found out that working in team is of great importance for the equality of all group members

Students, who participated on the course in 2014/2015 at the Sofia university "St. Kliment Ohridski" did the following conclusions:

- The structure of the project allows participants to learn about specific steps and laws when engaging in a research.
- The IPC project allows active participation - exchange of experience and ideas for expanding horizons in the personal and professional aspect of its participants.
- Participation in international group requires good knowledge of the working language (English). Part of students experiencing difficulties with English and became passive participants. This creates some discomfort at all levels and makes difficult the completion of the task.
- Opportunity for discussion and exchange of different practices in different countries, allows comparison and exchange of knowledge towards different issues and allows the construction of a reasoned position of each participant.
- Group work, increases students' skills in organizing, good time management, tolerance and argumentation when participating in discussions.

- Knowledge of different cultures and educational systems and the creation of new professional contacts and research skills (Radeva/ Velkovski, 2015, 101).

2.6 Conclusions

The analysis of the international and national research shows that students positively identify their collaboration with foreign universities from different countries and continents and the joint work on the pedagogical project.

They appreciated the university course "Internet and Competence to Work on the Project"/ "International Project" and consider it of great importance for their future profession. In their opinion the future trends in education will require teamwork skills, communicative competences, skills for working with information and communication technologies and national and international collaboration with colleagues from different schools all over the world.

Obtaining information about foreign education systems, the comparison of pedagogical realities, learning about foreign cultures and traditions is perceived as a great advantage of the international online course.

In the conditions of a pandemic, the desire for online learning and communication between students working in international groups is intensifying because of a situation of social isolation, due to limited live contacts.

The variety of programs and means of online communication the students use during the pandemic is increasing. The competence of students to work with information and communication technologies is also growing.

The information and communication technologies are becoming a substitute for direct social contacts and communication in the conditions of a pandemic. They become a powerful means of communication and overcoming social isolation.

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